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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The 2012 Rebellion in North Mali: the MNLA Insurgency, Caught Between the State and the French Intervention

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ABSTRACT

In 2012, North Mali was riven by an armed insurrection. The rebellion was led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a mostly Tuareg armed organization, allied with Islamist elements. Its aim was the secession of the Northern territories of the country and to claim the independence of Azawad. Throughout the different phases of the crisis, the MNLA always remained a key actor, being able to reshape its political and military strategy in order to adapt to the evolution of the situation. In this context, France played a capital role. French authorities contributed to giving a new political legitimacy to the Tuareg insurgents, despite strong opposition of political élites in Bamako; the Tuareg insurgents de facto exploited France, leveraging its security interests in pursuit of their own political goals. Examining the agency of insurgent actors in Kidal allows outlining the power relationship with the state institutions and the attempt of consolidating a system of informal rebel governance.

KEYWORDS: Mali – Tuareg – France – Insurgency – Legitimacy

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1. Introduction

The 2012-2013 crisis in Mali has defined a highly complex security environment, characterised by the presence of state and non-state actors and by the structuring of evolving strategic alliances, depending on changing circumstances and the prevalence of particular interests.

The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was a key player in the crisis. The insurrection launched during the first months of 2012 revealed the elements of structural fragility of the Malian state, which was deemed to be a model of democratic governance during the '90s (Thiriot 2002; Wing 2008). From the early 2000s, deep cleavages, particularly rooted in the desert areas of the north, acted as destabilising forces in the regional system. First, the proliferation of criminal trafficking networks (of drugs, weapons and human beings) developed as part of highly interconnected regional systems (Lacher 2012; Scheele 2012). Then, several jihādist armed groups, established during the Algerian civil war, were pushed into Northern Mali as a result of the harsh military repression of the Algiers regime (Harmon 2010; Lounnas 2013). Lastly, the recurrent environmental and climate crises boosted the spread of community conflicts over the access to natural resources.

The demands for independence of the Tuareg movement contributed to the political and institutional collapse of the country, deeply weakened by limited state capacity and a neo-patrimonial system of governance based on political nepotism, patronage and corruptive practices (Bergamaschi 2014). The military capture of the territories of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu by a heterogeneous coalition of Salafi-jihādist armed groups, following the MNLA's declaration of independence of Azawad, was partly a result of the loss of legitimacy of the Tuareg nationalist demands – as compared to the 1990s' rebellion – which were essentially disconnected from the north-Malian social fabric.

The evolution in the regional political status quo encouraged a redefinition of the MNLA strategic view. The secular movement capitalised the diplomatic openness of French authorities – who needed military support in the fight against

the Qaedist armed groups in the mountain region of the Adrar n Ifoghas – in order to gain international recognition of their autonomist claims in Kidal and obtain the consolidation of an informal system of governance.

We will focus hereby on the MNLA's changing sources of legitimacy in the Azawad, ranging from a presumed popular legitimacy, directly related to the social representativeness of its political claims, to an international legitimacy, that is an outcome of the movement's agency in leveraging on French interests, on one side, and the French authorities' co-opting strategies towards the Tuareg nationalists, on the other side, in the framework of the struggle on Salafi-jihādist armed groups.

This paper is based on a fieldwork conducted in Paris (April-June 2016) and Bamako (November-December 2016) through the collection of semi-structured interviews – selected quotes have been translated from French to English – of policy-makers, diplomatic and military officers, members of international (EU, UN) missions. It aims at reconstructing the dynamics of the MNLA's presence in the north-Malian region, the evolution of its political strategies and its search for legitimacy on the internal and international level. Furthermore, the paper analyses the power struggle between the MNLA and the state actors in Mali, as well as the conflict relationship with the Salafi-jihādist actors in the North, outlining elements of interest for further reflection, while contributing to the debate on insurgencies, rebel governance and areas of limited statehood.

2. Legitimacy, terrorism, limited statehood: theoretical premises

The concept of legitimacy defines the theoretical boundaries of the political discourse about the state in Mali and the MNLA as a central actor in the north. Weber defines legitimacy as “the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief [...] by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige” (Weber 1964, p. 382). He assumes that legitimacy rests on the belief of the absolute validity of a political order that generates people's voluntary compliance with the state authority. Generally, empiri-

cal legitimacy can be described as a social group's sense of obligation or willingness to accept the authority of governance actors, including external and non-state actors; it is an essential condition for the effectiveness of rule and the resilience of the systems of governance (Börzel & Risse 2018). Beetham adopts a different approach to legitimacy, stressing that "a given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs" (Beetham 1991, p. 11). He characterises as 'legitimate' any order that addresses people's demands of 'moral' legitimacy (Thomas 2013). This definition of legitimacy is based on three levels: its conformity to established rules; the fact that rules can be justified by reference to shared beliefs; the expression of consent on the part of subordinate groups to the power relation (McCulloch 2015).

While normative legitimacy can be justified according to universal and normative standards, empirical legitimacy is directly linked to the outputs provided by governance actors, in terms of normative appropriateness of capacity-building or service provision towards the population (Krasner & Risse 2014). Even if the normative legitimacy of an actor is questionable, its empirical legitimacy among supporters might be well grounded.

According to Suchman, legitimacy is a "generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman 1995, p. 574). Stillman describes legitimacy as "the compatibility of the results of governmental output with the value patterns of the relevant systems" (Stillman 1974, p. 48), stressing that a government is legitimate when it protects and enhances the values and norms of its citizens. Similarly, Levi points out that the legitimacy stems from the awareness that citizens have of the appropriateness of structures, officials and governance processes. Therefore, although it is possible to govern with the use of coercive power only, legitimate power makes the government more effective, because it facilitates the exercise of the domain, empowering the authority to steer the behaviours (Levi et al. 2009).

A key aspect of the notion of legitimacy stems from the capacity of the state to respond to the needs of the population. It is directly linked to the effectiveness of policies to deliver collective goods and services, which the social contract between government and governed is based on (Rotberg 2004), or the government's accountability towards citizens and their basic needs. The absence of the state in the domain of the provision of essential goods and services to the populations of marginalised areas, which enables non-state political or military actors to fill the state performance deficits, produces severe consequences for the service-related legitimacy of the system (Cilliers & Sisk 2013). The deficits in the state capacity undermine the quality of the political processes, nourishing centrifugal claims in areas of limited statehood (Krasner & Risse 2014).

The definition of 'areas of limited statehood' fits in the larger debate on ungoverned spaces in Sahel. In areas of limited statehood "central authorities lack the ability to implement and enforce rules and decisions or [...] the legitimate monopoly over the means of violence is lacking, at least temporarily" (Risse 2013, p. 4). This enables non-state actors to contest eventually institutional orders and to take over the role of state actors in enforcing regulations, ensuring security through the monopoly over the means of violence, delivering public services. External or rebel actors engage in state-building processes in order to fill the political or administrative capacity gap of the state (Krasner & Risse 2014). Order contestation "increases the risk of fragmenting societies along ethnic, religious, and ideological lines, thereby undermining social cohesion and trust. [...] The interaction between contested orders and limited statehood bears the risk of governance breakdowns" (Börzel & Risse 2018, p. 13) and violent opposition by non-state political actors seeking to establish a different order. As a result, governance in areas of limited statehood relies on a combination of state and non-state actors, lacking a fully functioning state capable to enforce and implement decisions (Risse 2012).

Generally, the concept of 'ungoverned space' is understood as a political space deprived of effective institutional control and directly related to the existence

of a security threat (Keister 2014). It assumes the inability of the state to rule a specific territory, ignoring though the existence of rebel-governed spaces and failing in adequately describing a social and political system defined by the interactions among different actors that do not comply with institutional and formal dynamics of control. In that sense, as claimed by Börzel and Risse, areas of limited statehood characterised by a dysfunctional state are rarely ‘ungoverned’, because “the provision of rules and regulations as well as of public goods and services does not necessarily depend on the existence of functioning state institutions” (Börzel & Risse 2015, p. 5). In North Mali, territories that meet the definition of ‘ungoverned spaces’ are marked by the presence of corrupted institutional power and bad political and socio-economic performances of formal governance structures, as well as the activation of informal governance processes. Consequently, more than ‘ungoverned spaces’ North Mali is characterised by multiple actors competing for power and influence – local and traditional authorities, traffickers, insurgent groups – and overlapping forms of governance (Bleck et al. 2016). This leads to rethinking and calling into question the ‘fragile state’ paradigm, understood as a political narrative that is instrumental in the pursuit of specific interests (Nay 2013). The limits of capacity, legitimacy and effectiveness of institutional presence in marginal and non-strategic areas create a political vacuum occupied by non-institutional actors. The criminalisation of informal governance processes in the so-called ‘ungoverned areas’, which is achieved by emphasising the role of external actors and the interpretations of instability as a product of ‘terrorism’ of armed groups, builds politically the need for international intervention that, in the case of Mali, has been associated with the militarisation of territories.

Finally, the debate on power relations between state and non-state – local or international – actors has been articulated around the ‘liberal peace’ framework, which outsources the problem of international intervention in terms of violation of state sovereignty or local capacity to build peace through the use of force against different forms of local resistance (Charbonneau & Sears 2014). The implied mean-

ing of the concept of ‘terrorism’ relates to a moral judgement on the use of force and violence. The ‘terrorist violence’ is delegitimised, while the terrorist actor is dehumanised and abstract from the specific historical context (Charbonneau & Jourde 2016). Ignoring the domestic drivers of insurgencies and characterising local actors as ‘terrorist’ may risk of misrepresenting their nature, with crucial policy implications such as “enabling government abuses that have previously driven recruitment into armed groups” (Matfess 2019). Reducing – for analytical purposes – the complexity of armed groups that challenge the state monopoly on the use of force implies undermining political and social claims related to state governance, service delivery inefficiency, government abuses, socio-economic marginalisation and imbalances in the distribution of resources. Therefore, prioritising a ‘terrorist’ label in the discourse about radical armed groups leads to the adoption of ineffective policy responses to local drivers of insurgency.

3. Legitimacy in rebel governance systems

Insurgent governance systems, based on practices through which rebel forces are able to control social interactions and to rule civil populations, require “a normative assessment of the ability of a rebel political authority to regulate life within a defined territory. Thus a ‘governance system’ refers to the practices of rule insurgents adopt” (Mampilly 2011, p. 4). The effectiveness of rebel governance relates to territorial control and security, institutional development and public good provision. Mampilly points out that the institution of a police force and the establishment of a legal mechanism are “determinant as to whether the rebel group is able to make the transition from a roving insurgency to a stationary one” (Mampilly 2011, p. 63). Rebel governance systems may include coercive, extractive and redistributive activities, through which non-state insurgent groups regulate socio-economic and political aspects of life, ranging from the violence monopoly over the territory under their control up to taxation, public goods provision, judicial and administrative structures.

Legitimacy, as a process constantly re-negotiated (O'Connor 2019), stands as a condition for rebel groups to stay in power. It allows non-state actors to exert power through voluntary or quasi-voluntary compliance, which is occasionally backed up by coercion (McCullogh 2015). When rebel forces become involved in governance processes, implementing collectively binding rules and providing a social contract based on the delivery of public services – security from state violence; education; health needs; food production and distribution, social justice – they have to legitimate themselves, justifying their agendas and actions in order to seek material and moral support from local communities. Performative legitimacy, in this sense, results from a delivery-based legitimization process. However, it is clear that, in the context of weak and predatory states, armed actors can gain legitimacy implementing minimal provision standards of security and protection (McCullogh 2015).

Worral states that legitimacy is “generated with reference to local norms, identities and realities which resonate with target populations. In this sense it attempts to link to local ordering practices and structures but can equally derive strength by challenging these same processes” (Worral 2017, p. 715). He describes pragmatic forms of legitimacy, based on protection, provision of services or willingness to share power, and moral legitimacy, which derives from the compatibility with existing social norms and moral or religious codes (Worral 2017). Legitimacy is therefore a social construction that shapes the rebel governance order and the absence of legitimacy influences the sustainability of the rebel order and the capacity of insurgent actors to operate and meet their own goals.

While coercion is often related to the use of violence in order to shape civilian behaviours and induce obedience, with the risk of being counterproductive and jeopardizing the stability of the system of rebel governance (Péclard & Mechoulan 2015), legitimization strategies increase the compliance of local populations and provide sustainability to their governance systems. Frerks and Terpstra highlight five legitimization strategies adopted by rebel groups. First, looking at a socio-

economic and political dimension, rebel leaders claim their positions as representatives of the local community's grievances. Second, they describe the enemy as inhuman and as a threat against which it is needed to adopt a violent action. The charisma of the leadership is also relevant as a source of legitimacy, as well as the readiness of the rebel fighters to sacrifice their life for a common goal. Lastly, the reference to popular belief systems, shared traditions, local cultures or religion may ensure legitimacy to rebel forces (Frerks & Terpstra 2017). Particularly, non-armed groups' strategies instrumentalising religion have been used to delegitimise existing power structures and systems of inequality, as shown through the strengthening of Salafi actors in North Mali (McCullogh 2015).

In order to obtain support of local populations, rebel organisations "adapt their message to local belief, or educate civilians to change their preferences" (Kasfir 2005, p. 281) through legitimisation strategies. The absence of legitimacy could weaken the rebel control of territories and populations, encouraging noncompliance, collaboration with the state or other non-state actors, sabotage actions and violent actions by local-based militias: these challenges push insurgent actors to negotiate with civilians and not to resort to systematic coercion (Péclard & Mechoulam 2015).

Rebel orders may take different forms depending on different styles of governance: some rebel actors may take territories to create proto-states while others may exert remote control governance lacking sufficient resources to hold territories. In any case, they need to engage with civilian populations to pursue their aims (Worral 2017). The legitimacy of rebel actors is therefore a crucial element to understand the dynamics of rebel governance.

Among the sources of legitimacy, external actors and international interventions forces are also supposed to play a critical role, through recognition of non-state insurgent actors as potential partner for cooperation or negotiation. Nonetheless, international recognition as a source of legitimacy does not automatically en-

sure the strengthening of insurgent governance systems, when opposed to locally rooted sources of legitimacy (Duyvesteyn 2017).

3. The MNLA and the 2012 insurgency in North Mali: a matter of legitimacy

The MNLA was officially established in November 2011. A general consent on the aims of the insurgency led to the merger of some heterogeneous groups, such as Tuareg fighters coming back to North Mali after the fall of al-Qadhafi's regime (Lecocq & Klute 2013),¹ militiamen involved in the '90s Tuareg rebellion (Cristiani & Fabiani 2013), Kel tamashek army deserters (Livermore 2013). From the political side, the civilian members of the National Movement of Azawad (MNA) asked the government in Bamako to put an end to structural political, social, economic marginalisation in the north of the country (Branson & Wilkinson 2013) and adopted a legitimisation strategy based on a presumed representativeness of the local socio-political grievances through a cross-ethnic approach.

In light of the successive crises that have occurred in the region of Azawad and the need to find solutions, the Mouvement National de l'Azawad (MNA) has been designated as the most relevant entity to politically address the needs and concerns of the people of Azawad [...] on the whole.²

Several Tuareg insurgencies have succeeded in Malian history. The first rebellion occurred in the 1960s, following the declaration of independence of French Sudan: the Tuareg insurgents, belonging to the Ifoghas clan, opposed Modibo Keita's socialist government, who repressed the rebels and militarized the region of Kidal. The second insurgency occurred in the early '90s and contributed to the collapse of Moussa Traoré's authoritarian regime (Grémont 2010). Lengthy negotia-

¹ Many Tuareg people decided to move to Libya in the 1980s due to the poor socio-economic conditions in their homeland. Once in Libya, they were enlisted and trained in the national army.

² '2010 dans l'Azawad (Nord du Mali). L'année du chaos sécuritaire, politique, économique et climatique', 03 November 2011, viewed 16 October 2019. < <http://mnlamov.net/actualites/46-2010.html> >

tions led to the signing of the 1996 peace agreement in Timbuktu (Boilley 1999). A third rebellion took place in 2006 and was fuelled by clan and intra-ethnic rivalries, and by the armed groups' interests in illicit trafficking networks (Lecocq 2010). In the case of 2012 MNLA's rebellion, the most peculiar aspect was linked to the widening of the political claims to the benefit of all ethnic communities in the region, due to the sharing of common problems by the local Tuareg, Songhai, Fulani and Arab people (Cline 2013). According to the MNLA's propaganda, secessionist claims were raised not only as expression of an existential right of the Tuareg communities to have their own homeland and obtain the recognition of an independent state, but also as the manifestation of the needs of the Northern populations to free themselves from a predatory and corrupt state. Furthermore, the nationalist rebels claimed that the armed offensive of January 2012 represented a legitimate response to the progressive militarization of Northern Mali. This had been imposed through the deployment of anti-terrorism programmes (Niang 2013) and the adoption of the Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development of North Mali (PSPSDN), financed by bilateral and multilateral donors. It was seen as an instrument for strengthening the military presence in the region rather than as a driver for the development of the Sahelian territories (International Crisis Group 2012). In this sense, the insurgents sought to obtain popular legitimacy depicting Malian government as willing to establish a 'southern' military presence in the North, through a vertical management structure and a lack of participation by the local communities.

The legitimacy of MNLA's demands was, however, inherently fragile, weakened by the lack of popular support given to the Azawad liberation movement (Gaasholt 2013). Despite claiming to represent the ethnically heterogeneous north-Malian populations (Chauzal & van Damme 2015), it was still perceived as a Tuareg ethno-nationalist organization (Klute 2013) and a tool in the hands of influential Kel intessar or Kel adagh clans to give strength to their own political interests, while claiming an abstract right to act on behalf of the people of the north. Several Arab, Fulani, Songhai communities and many Tuareg members of rival tribal confedera-

tions – such as Kel ansar and Kel iwellemmedan – were opposed to the MNLA, denying support and legitimacy to Tuareg rebels. Internal tensions and disagreements on whether the movement had to claim independence or a broader form of autonomy, weakened its cohesion and the coherence of its stances, with an impact on representativeness and legitimacy (Pezard & Shurkin 2015).

The deep heterogeneity of the armed movements in the Sahel-Saharan region of Mali did not prevent the formation of short-term arrangements to oppose the political power in Bamako. In particular, the events that took place in the first months of 2012 were the result of a convergence between the secular MNLA and Ansār al-Dīn, a Salafi Tuareg-based movement led by Iyad Ag Ghali, which advocated the institutionalisation of sharī'a law in the whole country without claiming the independence of the Azawad. (Thurston & Lebovich 2013). A former nationalist leader of the '90s Tuareg rebellion, he created Ansār al-Dīn after a failed attempt to be appointed as aménokal³ of the Ifoghas clan and head of the MNLA. Leveraging on a strong individual charismatic leadership, ag Ghali gave birth to his new political and military organisation. He adopted a legitimisation strategy based on the Salafi-jihādist ideology and the rhetoric of the violent struggle against state authorities and the Western powers, in a social environment where the growing influence of political Islam in the public sphere was “rooted in a call for better social justice and a will to reassert ethical values in response to growing corruption” (Marchal 2013, p. 4).

In the background, the main Qaedist groups in the area – al-Qā'ida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Movement for Unity and Jihād in West Africa, significantly involved in drug trafficking⁴ (Raineri & Strazzari 2015) – provided military and financial support to Ansār al-Dīn, thanks to the common ideological positions

³ The title of Tuareg's traditional political leaders.

⁴ While the involvement of AQIM in the criminal trafficking activities was circumscribed to the collection of taxes imposed on convoys carrying drugs or illicit goods to allow them to pass through the desert zones under their control, the MUJWA was deeply involved in trans-Saharan trafficking networks, thanks to the complicity of local politicians and traditional authorities.

and political demands. The differences among the insurgent actors were provisionally put aside in order to pursue a common interest: opposing the militarization of sub-Saharan territories, breaking the resistance of the Malian army and taking control of the Northern regions of the country. Because of its alliance with the jihādīst groups, the MNLA attracted accusations of involvement in international terrorism activities by the government and the international community.

The military attack by MNLA and Ansār al-Dīn began in January 2012. The rebels forced the Malian army, poorly equipped and inadequately trained for combat in a desert environment, to retreat in the face of the sudden offensive (Perret 2014). The *coup d'état* by some non-commissioned officers in Bamako,⁵ aimed at strengthening the military response to the rebels' offensive in the North, had the opposite effect to precipitate out the events, speeding up the collapse of the army and increasing considerably the number of deserter soldiers, many of which were convinced to switch allegiances to the insurgency (Wing 2016).

By the end of March, the rebels occupied the main towns in the north. The mujāhidīn of AQIM played a leading role in the fall of the cities of Kidal and Timbuktu (Lounnas 2012). Two-thirds of the country therefore ended up under the control of the MNLA and the jihādīst militiamen. The capture of the North Mali by nationalist insurgents and jihādīst militants went together with a progressive restructuring of power relationships between the MNLA and the Qaedist groups. On April 2, Ansār al-Dīn, with the support of AQIM, forced the MNLA to leave Timbuktu's city centre. In the same vein, Kidal was placed under the control of Ag Ghali's fighters, who accessed the town first after the withdrawal of the Malian army. In fact, Ansār al-Dīn broke the alliance with the MNLA and announced the imposition of Islamic law on the occupied areas (International Crisis Group 2012).

⁵ The coup leader, Amadou Haya Sanogo, accused the president Touré of feeding his own influence in the north without addressing the root causes of the Tuareg insurgency. He was also charged of having displayed an excessively conciliatory behavior towards the armed groups in Azawad. It is worth noting that, before the coup, several demonstrations had already revealed a deep popular dissatisfaction with a corrupted political class who shared responsibility for the crisis with the rebels.

On April 6, 2012, despite the loss of centrality in the political and military balances of the alliance, the MNLA proclaimed the independence of Azawad. Nevertheless, the unilateral declaration did not mean achieving nationalist aims. Rather, it seemed to lay the foundations for the crystallisation of a jihādist sanctuary in the heart of the Sahel. The full deployment of Ag Ghali's fighters in the cities left by the national army and the increased presence of the mujāhidīn of AQIM and MUJWA forced the MNLA to withdraw to the suburban areas of the main towns (Pellerin 2012). On June 26, the MUJWA members, who had strongly consolidated their presence in Gao enjoying the support of AQIM's leaders, attacked the MNLA militias, instrumentalising a widespread anti-MNLA sentiment among local communities (Desgrais et al. 2018). They inspired a popular uprising that forced the MNLA to flee the city and to take refuge in Ménaka, before being chased away from the town in November 2012 (Lecocq & Klute 2019).

4. The jihādist performative legitimacy and the consolidation of power in Azawad

By the autumn of 2012, the alliance among Islamist movements was exerting a military and administrative control over the entire north of Mali: Ansār al-Dīn reinforced its presence in Kidal, the MUJWA had its stronghold in Gao while AQIM was mainly based in Timbuktu.

In October, facing a situation of political and military marginalisation, the MNLA began to redefine its political strategies. The movement announced the surrender of its secessionist claims and the adoption of a new approach towards Malian institutions and the international community, based on a more acceptable demand for regional self-determination. The leadership of the Tuareg-based organisation sought to obtain international recognition and support (Marchal 2012): this was a first step in the process of changing its sources of legitimacy, acknowledging itself as a trustworthy (secular) bargaining partner in North Mali, whose support would have been essential in the struggle against jihādist actors.

Several factors favoured the strengthening of Ansār al-Dīn and the other jihādīst groups in terms of popular support: first, the advance towards Gao and Timbuktu was fostered by the presence of a non-hostile social, politico-economic and religious ground to the project of promoting a strict version of sharʿīa law within the framework of the Malian state. Qaedist organisations co-opted and funded several religious leaders and traditional authorities, obtaining in return the support for the spread of a Salafi Islam (Konaté 2015): they acted somehow as a legitimisation driver for the jihādīst actors, which took advantage of religious beliefs to achieve compliance from local communities and delegitimise institutional powers and international actors.

AQIM had established its operational base in Timbuktu since the early 2000s, operating in a largely undisturbed manner thanks to what many analysts considered a kind of ‘non-belligerent’ agreement with the Government of Amadou Toumani Touré (personal communication, former civil servant at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 May 2016). Abd al-Malik Drukdal's organization adopted a thorough and gradual social penetration strategy, based on a combination of military, political, religious, economic and humanitarian instruments (Bøås & Torheim 2013). It structured a network of alliances with local communities, assisting them financially and offering protection from criminals (Tham Lindell & Mattsson 2014): “al-Qāʿida [is presented] as the defender of the local population and, more globally, of all Muslims. Thus, AQIM and its affiliated Salafi-inspired movements stand out as fighters for the rights of local people in order to get the necessary support from them” (Lounnas 2012, p. 52). During the occupation, AQIM's members built a ‘jihādīst’ welfare system, based on the delivery of essential services such as water, electricity, land, mineral resources, employment and housing policies, to the benefit of historically marginalised communities (De Georgio 2015). They gradually obtained a performative-based social legitimacy, filling the gap in institutional governance through the provision of security, justice and basic goods.

The Northern Malian communities called for safety, education and health that they did not obtain from the Malian state. The jihādīst groups provided services, the Gao hospital worked very well during the occupation and there were no security problems. [...] The sharʿīa was already the traditional source of justice for civil disputes. [...] The reality is that, as the state justice does not work, the traditional justice has to be applied. In any case, the people concerned will grab on whom can provide them with a minimum standard of protection and security (personal communication, former civil servant at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 May 2016).

AQIM and the jihādīst groups proved particularly careful to nourish the support of the populations, by addressing their basic needs. They capitalized on the popular discontent caused by the widespread insecurity, the multiplication of community conflicts, the lack of public services and the endemic poverty. They provided subsidies and economic assistance to poor families, further strengthening their social relationships to local communities (Briscoe 2014).

The communities said that they felt safe. They did not pay taxes and enjoyed some [social] support. When someone was sick, [the jihādīsts] took care of him. [...] They introduced an element of certainty of legal punishment. [...] We should admit that they are not bandits; they are individuals with [political] objectives. [...] It is true that not everyone accepts their project, but it is after all a project aiming to build something. [...] Some farmers in Timbuktu told me that when the jihādīsts were there, local communities were happier. [...] At a certain point in time, the communities benefited entirely from the water and electricity without paying, even if this situation could not last forever: probably, a socially accepted price would have been negotiated. Therefore, there is a clear problem of governance – bad governance practices, corruption, favouritism, nepotism – while the rights and aspirations of the people were better met while the Salafi-jihādīsts were there. The state often abuse its power, does not fulfil its obligations in the domain of public service. Our politicians have personal ambitions that are detrimental to the satisfaction of the people concerned (personal communication, civil servant at the Malian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, originally from Timbuktu, 15 December 2016).

In sharp contrast to the state of neglect of the north, in the absence of public services, infrastructure and structural investments (Bleck & Michelitch 2015), the jihādīst system was based first on ensuring the incorruptibility of Islamist officials and on effective public order and security management. Justice was ensured by the certainty of a legal punishment proportional to the offence committed, and by means of extensive and rigorous social control carried out by an Islamic police, often made up of young people recruited locally (Konaté 2015). This ‘real governance’ system allowed the jihādīst groups to secure the power, transforming violence into legitimate domination through the provision of several measures to sustain local communities and earn legitimate recognition by them (Polese & Santini 2018).

Despite the alleged legitimacy of the regional and inter-ethnic grievances of the Tuareg nationalist movement, the Northern populations were often more favourable to the jihādīst presence, because of the ability of Islamists to put in place socio-economic systems that were compatible with the needs and characteristics of the social fabric. Furthermore, while the MNLA was still considered as an ethnic-based movement fighting for a Tuareg-controlled independent Azawad, the jihādīsts’ claim to establish an Islamic state in Mali did not rest on any ethnic or racial exclusionary attitude (Lecocq et al. 2013).

Boàs explained the fragile legitimacy of the MNLA stressing that, as a movement mainly composed of fighters who returned to Mali in 2011 after years in Algeria and Libya, the MNLA was regarded as opportunistic. The militants of Ansār al-Dīn, AQIM and MUJWA seemed to be more deeply rooted in the Northern Malian society, thanks to strong social relations developed over the years, than the MNLA. Nationalist demands were largely disconnected from the political and social context, in which local communities were not asking for secession, but claimed instead better governance, service delivery, justice and security (Boàs 2015).

Following the military occupation of the north, the deficit of social and political legitimacy of the MNLA insurgents towards the Northern populations turned into open hostilities of Malian communities against them. Tuareg nationalists

committed violence towards the communities living in the occupied areas, looting of banks and public institutions, abuses of power (Onuoha & Thurston 2013) to respond to the need for supplies in the absence of the funding expected to support the rebellion (Marchal 2012). They dismantled the state bureaucracy in the occupied territories but were unable to build up new administrative structures, and failed to enforce order, security and justice (Bøås & Torheim 2013). The MNLA de facto renounced to secure legitimacy to its political power and did not act to strengthen a form of popular consent among the communities of the Azawad (Lecocq & Klute 2013).

The MNLA committed violence against local populations much more than other groups. [...] For this reason, the populations of the north hated the nationalist rebels, and when the MUJWA expelled the MNLA from Gao, the people supported it and agreed with their decision. Subsequently, the situation in Gao was quiet: [...] for this reason, the local communities have started to appreciate jihādists, considering that the MNLA militiamen were the real terrorists. Somehow, they tolerated the sharʿiā and the amputations of hands in return for peace (personal communication, Tuareg member of the National Assembly of Mali, 09 December 2016).

In Timbuktu, AQIM members ensured people protection against MNLA members' violence: jihādists provided them with a 'green' phone number to call in case of harassment by the Tuareg nationalists (Bøås & Torheim 2013). The local communities in Gao, hostile to the secessionist intentions of the MNLA fighters, rose up against them. They supported to a larger extent the prospects offered by the MUJWA mujāhidīn, who "let the MNLA Tuaregs harass the population before intervening and restoring law and order" (Marchal 2013, p. 16). The MUJWA did not use a liberation discourse, nor aimed to build an independent state, but rather helped to meet the social demands and the economic needs as part of a highly effective territorial consolidation strategy (Raineri 2015).⁶

⁶ The growing difficulties in providing the delivery of goods and services boosted the re-emergence of social cleavages that destabilized the networks of alliance built up by the Salafi-jihādist armed

5. France and MNLA: towards a change in the legitimization strategies

Part of the MNLA's leadership was based in Paris, particularly its media and political wing. This aspect contributed to project the movement as a pro-West secular force, hoping for support from France and other Western powers (Desgrais et al. 2018). Nevertheless, at the first stage of the Tuareg insurrection in Azawad, the reaction of French authorities was hesitant. This cautious attitude was imposed by the need to protect French expatriates in Mali and by the urgency to manage carefully the issue of hostages kidnapped by jihādīst groups in the region. Alain Juppé, French Minister of Foreign Affairs under Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency, talked about the need to "deal with the Tuareg issue in depth" (Notin 2014, p. 70), avoiding any sharp condemnation of the insurrection.

For many observers, the French attitude towards the Malian crisis was the natural development of what happened in Libya. Pointing out a historical convergence between French authorities and Kel tamashek people in Sahel, many political activists and civil society organizations accused Sarkozy of having reached an agreement with the Tuareg fighters enlisted in the Libyan army during the '80s. Specifically, the 'Libyan' Tuareg would have deserted, giving up the fight in defence of al-Qadhafi's regime and allowing the French military forces to launch their final offensive. In exchange, they would have received reassurances on the support of French diplomacy to the secessionist claims towards the Malian state, on condition that they engaged in the struggle against al-Qā'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Mali (Notin 2014).

On February 26, 2012, Juppé went to Bamako to see Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), discussing with him the last developments of the

groups and weakened the systems of governance in the region. This caused in turn the worsening of the conditions of social control of the local populations and a more and more severe imposition of the Islamic law to the communities by the jihādīst authorities, despite the instructions provided by the AQIM leadership, which advocated a gradual application of the shar'īa for ensuring success to their political project.

political and security crisis in the country. During the public press conference, the French Minister reaffirmed the importance of ensuring the respect of the fundamental principles of unity and territorial integrity, excluding any possibility for a military intervention and endorsing the path for an inclusive dialogue with the insurgent actors.⁷ At the same occasion, the local press solicited him to clarify the French responsibility regarding the alleged support assured to the MNLA. In fact, several Malian political actors highlighted a proximity of French authorities towards Tuareg armed groups (Bergamaschi & Diawara 2014), because of historical and cultural linkages and the possibility to obtain from them some sort of assistance for the liberation of the hostages detained in the Sahel (personal communication, member of the National Assembly of Mali, 24 November 2016). This theory was confirmed, in their view, precisely by the presence of some eminent members of the political direction of the nationalist movement in France.

We never questioned the unity and territorial integrity of Mali. If asking to the MNLA to lay down the arms was enough, this would be perfect. Nevertheless, if we restrict ourselves to this view and we continue to confront each other, there will be no solution. [...] Only a political dialogue could allow to come out the impasse and not a violent confrontation, because in this moment the consequences could be extremely severe, not only for Mali but for the whole region. [...] Clearly, we need to negotiate [with the rebels]. However, what is important to avoid is the negotiation with the terrorists. We have denounced since long time the danger of AQIM, which got stronger in the last months. [...] In our view, there is no ambiguity: terrorism is the first enemy and AQIM is threatening us directly. [...] Therefore, this is the red line not to go beyond. For the rest, it is evident that there are issues emerging in North Mali, and these issues must be dealt with. It's not the responsibility of France to negotiate or propose solutions: we only could ensure support and mediation (personal communication, former French ambassador to Mali, 13 May 2016).

⁷ 2012, 'Point de presse de M. Alain Juppé, ministre des affaires étrangères et européennes, sur les difficultés de la situation au Mali confronté au terrorisme et menacé dans son intégrité territoriale, Bamako le 26 février 2012', *Vie Publique*, 02 March, viewed 08 January 2019. <<http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/123000508.html>>

The former French ambassador in Bamako denied any hypothesis of a presumed preferential treatment for the Tuareg militants:

There was no relationship between the ambassador and the MNLA. In 2011, some Tuareg representatives in the National Assembly asked for meeting me, and I received them. They were members of ADEMA, the ruling party supporting ATT. I received them as I received any other representative who wished to see me, whichever their party. [...] Following the *coup d'état*, I found out that these representatives had become members of the MNLA [...]. I never met someone who told me to be a MNLA or MNA member, at that time. I knew that they claimed for autonomy, but I perceived them just as critical members of the Parliament (personal communication, former French ambassador to Mali, 13 May 2016).

The declaration of independence of Azawad triggered the political-institutional collapse of the country, and encouraged a stronger diplomatic initiative by France, together with the regional actors.

On May 15, François Hollande was officially designated President of the Republic. The attention of the new socialist government was directed to the Malian crisis, which was considered a foreign policy priority. Initially, the French political and diplomatic strategy was based on a clear move away from the MNLA, which was deemed as a key player in the crisis but not a partner in the negotiations. The legitimacy of the claims raised by the movement was questioned because of the low representativeness of the populations of Northern Mali: the Tuareg communities were acknowledged as a minority in the North, except for Kidal. In addition, the unclear relations with Ag Ghali's Ansār al-Dīn, which advocated the constitution of a Malian Islamic state, carried weight for France, even though the DGSE intelligence services – to which some analysts attribute a proximity to the nationalist movement in the region (Marchal 2012) – would continue to maintain a relationship with its leaders (Notin 2014). With regard to the declaration of independence of Azawad made by the insurgents, France pointed out that a unilateral application of

self-determination claims not garnering the recognition of African states could not be considered legitimate (Ayoedema 2015).

However, at the end of November, the French strategy for the management of the Malian crisis seemed to change, at least in part. The rupture of the alliance between the MNLA and the Qaedist movements, which excluded the secular nationalists from the political-administrative management of the regions of the north, allowed the leaders of the movement to redefine their political strategies. The violent marginalisation of Tuareg insurgents in Azawad made a political relationship with them potentially acceptable for French authorities. A delegation of the movement was received at the Quai d'Orsay, in the presence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius, and the Special Representative for the Sahel, Jean-Félix Paganon. The circumstance seemed to upset the diplomatic balances outlined by Paris until then, due to the hostility of Malian political actors towards the Tuareg insurgents. The rationale behind the French decision to receive representatives of the Azawad movement at the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were not specified. It seemed clear, however, the will to engage the nationalist rebels at the bargaining table as political interlocutors.

France explored the willingness of the movement to give up demands for independence and secession, within a highly decentralised state and an institutional system characterised by the recognition of a wide range of autonomy to the regions in the north. However, the negotiations were suspended in the face of the MNLA's requests to prevent the comeback of the Malian army in Kidal: this demand was held inadmissible by the French negotiators, since it was not compatible with the aim of restoring Malian national unity and territorial integrity.

The political dialogue initiated by Paris with the representatives of the Tuareg insurgents was sharply conflicting with the positions of Malian political actors in Bamako, who were adverse to any involvement of the Tuareg movements in the crisis management and resolution processes. The meeting between the MNLA delegation, led by Moussa Ag Assarid, and the representatives of French diplomacy

raised the anger of Malian political élites in Bamako. They accused France of collusion with the Tuareg insurgents and blamed them for legitimising MNLA ‘terrorists’, responsible for the secession of Azawad, through a political dialogue that “was enabling them to talk to France²⁴” (personal communication, former French ambassador to Mali, 13 May 2016).

6. Variation in rebel orders: a new international legitimacy

During the night of 9 to 10 January 2013, the jihādist armed groups assaulted the town of Konna and its military base. Once again, the Malian army proved to be structurally unprepared to deal with the offensive, letting the Qaedist armed forces advance (Bergamaschi 2013). The sudden attack southward reinforced the consensus on the fact that immediate external military action was needed. On January 10, Dioncounda Traoré officially requested military action from France, in support of the Malian response to the jihādist attack on the first defence lines of the army. Two days later, on January 11, 2013, President Hollande endorsed the deployment of the Opération Serval, consisting of three steps: to block and destroy the advance of jihādist pick-ups; to win back the towns of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu; to intercept surviving fighters in the Sahel and in the Adrar Mountains (Chivvis 2016; Galy 2013). The main targets of French intervention – preserving the Malian sovereignty, restoring the territorial integrity of the state, destroying the jihādist sanctuary in the region – were accomplished within a few weeks (Delage 2013). The mujāhidīn, deprived of military assets that had been destroyed by the bombing of French aviation (Leauthier & Merchet 2013), were forced to evacuate the main Northern cities.⁸ Following the recapture of the north, the French political and military apparatus announced that the emergency phase of the operation was closed. The next stage of the intervention was the definitive neutralisation of the ji-

⁸ 2013, ‘Where have the jihādists gone?’, *The Economist*, 02 February, viewed 08 January 2019. <<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/02/02/where-have-the-jihadists-gone>>

hādīst threat, in order to ensure the implementation of a state-building process (Shurkin 2014).

The Qaēdist armed groups adopted a resistance strategy based on different military tactics. They melted into the civil populations, planning an irregular and asymmetric warfare consisting of raids, ambushes and suicide bombings (Walther et al. 2016). In other cases, they took refuge in the mountains of the Adrar n Ifoghas, where the stronghold of AQIM was located, all the while avoiding frontal clashes in order to weaken the enemy's military force in the long term.⁹

The political aim of French diplomacy was to develop a form of constructive engagement with the secular Kel tamashek nationalists, involving them in the struggle against terrorism and providing "new opportunities to renegotiate their positions in the power competition with other insurgent actors" (Bencherif & Campana 2017). The perfect knowledge of the regional geography by the jihādīst groups seriously challenged the French forces, which were confronted with the enemy on a hostile ground, facing the risk of a stagnation of the conflict. The alliance with Tuareg rebels was perceived as an effective way to limit the asymmetries of the jihādīst guerrilla.

From the beginning of February, the French authorities had already put forward a statement of legitimacy for the Tuareg 'non-terrorists' rebels from MNLA and MIA, a breakaway group of Ansār al-Dīn led by Alghabbas Ag Intallah, the son of the traditional Ifoghas authority (Wing 2016). They were raised to the rank of unavoidable bargaining actors in the negotiations for the restoration of constitutional legality in the country (Bencherif & Campana 2017). On the same days, French soldiers were entering Kidal without the support of Malian soldiers, in order to limit the potential risk of interethnic violence (Wing 2013). This was seen as a

⁹ The definition of *fluid* conflict, i.e. a war made by "actors susceptible to rapidly change and adapt to the strategic environment" seems particularly suited to describe the characteristics of the third phase of confrontation between French forces and the jihādīst armed groups: "Organisational transformations broaden the range of fluid actors options. Deprived of the limits represented by a population to defend or preserve, they earn a certain freedom which enables them to target all types of objective, even the least conventional" (Leboeuf 2005, pp. 625-638).

confirmation of the existence of an agreement, negotiated and concluded by the DGSE services, between Paris and representatives of the Azawad's liberation movement. France would have taken advantage of the deep knowledge of the Adrar upland areas by Tuareg rebels and the valuable information provided by the followers of Ag Intallah on Ansār al-Dīn, in order to identify the jihādīst fighters, weaken their resistance and obtain the release of the Western hostages held by them (Notin 2014). In return, the control of the town of Kidal would have been temporarily assigned to the Tuareg groups (Lecocq & Klute 2019), while members of the Malian national army would have been prevented to access the area. In the medium term, the issue of recognising the territorial autonomy to the Tuareg communities would have been taken into account.

According to Mampilly, the variation in rebel governance systems “stems from a combination of the initial preferences of rebel leaders and the interaction of insurgent organizations with a variety of other social and political actors” (Mampilly 2011, pp. 15-16). This reflects the shifting sources of legitimacy for nationalist rebel actors in North Mali. The Tuareg secular movement became politically attractive to France (Desgrais et al. 2018). It was co-opted as part of a strategy intended for identifying and killing the mujāhidīn in the massif of Ifoghas, despite the hostilities of the national political representatives and the population in Bamako against the Azawadian movements.¹⁰ Marginalised by the jihādīst groups and forced to seek refuge in the Kidal stronghold, the Tuareg insurgents laid down the conditions for a collaboration with French forces in the north, which was needed by Paris to conduct the military operations, detect and eradicate the Qaedist mujāhidīn in the Adrar n Ifoghas. France recognised the MNLA and MIA militias' right to exercise administrative and security control over the territory of Kidal, ensuring that the Malian national army would have been banned from the area until the conditions for democ-

¹⁰ Among people in Bamako favourable to negotiations for the resolution of the crisis in the North, only a small minority (18%) was supportive of a dialogue with jihādīst or Tuareg nationalist movement (MNLA) according to a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES Bamako) survey conducted in February 2013.

racy were restored. Thus, the political recognition they obtained by cooperating with France in the framework of the military operations in the north was part of a strategy of action intended to acquire an international legitimacy functional to the pursuit of its aims. This strengthen all the while jihādists insurgents' legitimacy based on the opposition to external actors' interference in local-rooted dynamics and their nature of 'crusader' invaders.

The alliance between France and MNLA was eventually confirmed. The Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian highlighted the good intelligence relations as well as the logistical and operational coordination with the Tuareg groups, which had accompanied the French advance in the north and guaranteed some popular support for the presence of Western troops on the territory of Kidal (Shurkin 2014).

The acknowledgement of a political and military relationship with the Tuareg groups gave rise to strong criticisms in Bamako, where a large majority of people claimed that the MNLA was standing up for its own members' interests.¹¹ French authorities were accused of supporting the cause of the Tuareg terrorists, as the rebels were still defined, although they had distanced themselves from the jihādists of Ansār al-Dīn, AQIM and MUJWA, and declared they would have been ready to negotiate with the government. In the perception of people and political élites in Bamako, Paris was giving legitimacy to the members of insurgent groups who had been involved in conflict violence and found guilty of having triggered the crisis, undermining the integrity of the state and the sovereignty of national institutions. In particular, President Dioncounda Traoré criticised the French decision to involve the MIA rebels in the crisis management processes, stating that he did not recognise any difference between Ansār al-Dīn and dissidents led by Ag Intallah,

¹¹ 89% of people interviewed in Bamako accused the MNLA of defending particular interests rather than prioritising Tuareg communities' demands. 90% of the cross-section deemed that the MNLA and MIA preventing Malian army's entry to Kidal was incomprehensible (25,8%) or unacceptable (64,1%).

2013, Mali – Mètre. Enquête d'opinion « Que pensent les Maliens ? », no. 2, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mali/10100/2013-02.pdf>>

who escaped their responsibilities and dissociated from Ag Ghali and AQIM for opportunistic reasons (Boisbouvier 2013). Ambassador Rouyer warned the French authorities against the political risks of a strategy intended to promote the MIA and the MNLA insurgents as privileged partners:

Four days after the start of the intervention, [...] there were French flags everywhere. In Bamako, people called children 'François Hollande'. It was something huge, a total reversal of the initial situation. However, I warned to pay attention, as these 'acquis' remained fragile and if ever we French gave the sense of double standards, treating Gao and Timbuktu differently from Kidal, we would have had problems. We could not give the idea of protecting the MNLA and the MIA when the aim was to fight AQIM. We needed to be clear and impose the Malian authorities on the national territory as a whole. On this point, the analyses diverged from the ones in Paris. The Government was at the forefront of the need to find an agreement on the ground. I understood the military aspect and the will of not having to deal with armed forces on the two fronts, the jihādīst and the secessionist forces, but regarding the strategy of relying on the secessionist forces to fight jihādīsts... personally, I did not agree (personal communication, former French ambassador to Mali, 13 May 2016).

7. The MNLA and the power struggle over Kidal

The territorial integrity of Mali was formally restored with the re-establishment of the French and Malian control on the regions occupied by the Salafi armed groups. However, Kidal represented an outstanding exception. French forces delegated the security and political-administrative control of the area to the Tuareg armed movements until the conclusion of a peace deal with Bamako. Within the framework of this agreement, the FAMa (*Forces Armées Maliennes*) were prevented to entry the city in order to avoid violent clashes with rebel armed groups and possible reprisals against civilian populations.¹²

¹² In May 2013, more than a half of Bamako (69,4%) and Mopti (56,8%) dwellers stated that they didn't trust the collaboration between the insurgent groups and French forces, since they accessed Kidal together with MNLA and MIA's rebels preventing Malian army to restore their control over the town.

De facto, France recognised a special status to one of the main urban centres in the north and imposed limitations on the exercise of sovereignty by the national institutions in Mali. As explained by a diplomatic official at the French Embassy in Bamako, “in the occasion of the recapture of the north, the Malian army had [demonstrated] neither the human capacities nor the military capabilities needed to provide an effective contribution to the peace-building” (personal communication, civil servant at the French embassy of Mali, 02 December 2016). In other words, Paris gave legitimacy to a system of governance defined by the monopoly on the use of force by (former) insurgent actors, and characterised by the exclusion of political state actors, government authorities and military institutions.

The recognition of an exception regarding the territory of Kidal fed the upsurge in the conflict between local security forces and the national army. On May 17, 2014, Prime Minister Moussa Mara decided to move to Kidal in order to establish the state authority in a territory that had been outside the scope and control of the Malian institutions until that moment. This decision occurred despite the unfavourable opinion expressed by the French forces, the UN mission for the stabilization of the country (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, MINUSMA) and other members of the government, based on the assessment of a serious risk of fighting and violent demonstrations. Mara’s initiative boosted the armed response of rebel militias, which led to the death of soldiers and institutional members of the government delegation.¹³ On May 20, Mara ordered the armed forces to move northwards and free the city of Kidal. Many soldiers were killed or forced to flee and leave to Bamako. Several requests for Prime Minister’s resignation were made, but he also obtained a form of popular recogni-

2013, Mali – Mètre. Enquête d’opinion « Que pensent les Maliens ? », no. 3, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mali/10100/2013-03.pdf>>

¹³ 2014, ‘Moussa Mara à Kidal: retour sur une visite mouvementée’, *RFI*, 21 May, viewed 12 January 2019. <<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20140521-mali-moussa-mara-kidal-retour-une-visite-mouvementee>>

tion for defending the unity of the Malian nation (Wing 2014). Looking back at the events in Kidal, Mara complained about his decisions as legitimate:

When I was appointed as Prime Minister, a governorate of Kidal was established. The Malian army was present and the Malian state worked enough. [...] Services and other functions started to be restored. The armed groups had signed the Ouagadougou Agreement, which made it possible to organise the elections. Group leaders took part in the process, and many of them are members of the National Assembly of Mali. As Prime Minister of Mali, I claimed the possibility to leave to Kidal. My visit had absolutely nothing to do with a provocation: it was just an administrative visit to make sure that the public services were at the disposal of the communities of Kidal, since we considered them as Malians as the people in Bamako. [...] There should not have been any limit to the freedom of movement of the Prime Minister on the ground: for this reason, I have no regret for what I did. I would do it again exactly in the same way. The events following the visit took place rather because of a deliberate attack by the armed groups on an official delegation of the state, and I think that this is the way it should be considered and dealt with. They attacked unarmed civilian administrators and killed them, committing a war crime. Ascribing to me the responsibility for death and destruction means giving evidence of amnesia or bad faith. [...] Political and public engagement must be undertaken based on principles and beliefs. The first of these principles is that we are a sovereign state that is internationally recognised and has some territories that need to be integrated. The legitimate authorities should have the right to go to these territories (personal communication, former Prime Minister of Mali, 20 November 2016).

The Kidal crisis certified the state's inability to impose its own authority on part of the national territory, showing the limitations on the exercise of its sovereignty, which had been formally re-established after the international intervention (Baudais 2015). The armed groups prevented the establishment of local authorities and prefects and the access to the territory by the armed forces. Teachers and all professional figures who were linked to the state authority were fired. In 2016, one of the main political opponents to the President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, Soumaïla Cissé, described the situation of Kidal:

After the Prime Minister's visit, we completely lost Kidal: the armed groups came back and the administration defected all the north of the country. Schools are closed, judges have gone, administration moved to big regional capitals and big cities. Today, in Kidal, there is no representation of the national administration. The governor itself is no longer there. [...] The elections scheduled were not held, and this is not happening because people do not want, but rather because the armed groups and the criminal networks prevent it. They cheated the ballot, threatened people and confiscated electoral material. [...] There can be no sovereignty as long as the administration is not present on the territory (personal communication, member of the National Assembly of Mali, 23 November 2016).

France and the members of MINUSMA, which were angered by the initiative of the Prime Minister Mara and refused to secure his convoy on the way to the governorate, were accused of protecting the Tuareg in Kidal. French policy was confronted with its contradictions: on the one hand, Paris claimed support of the Tuareg forces in the struggle against the jihādist armed groups and for the restoration of Malian sovereignty in the north while, on the other hand, it prevented the state to affirm authority over part of its territory. In this view, the connections between special forces, political circles in Paris and Tuareg groups did produce a certain tolerance towards the MNLA members, which were legitimated by the international recognition and were enabled to further strengthen their influence and political weight in Kidal. After the signing of the Algiers Peace Agreement in 2015, the ambiguities of a convergence between French political and military authorities and the coalition of former Tuareg rebels, the CMA (Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad), fostered the consolidation of a mutual-benefitting relationship. As Marchal pointed out:

In Mali, there have been extremely ambivalent feelings towards French intervention. On the one hand, France was celebrated, during the trips of Hollande to Timbuktu [...] while on the other side it was considered the source of any attempt to divide Mali or to install the Tuareg groups in power. What is true, since there are clearly signals to this effect, is

[the existence of] a huge ambiguity from the Barkhane force, which needs [the collaboration] of Tuareg people to track the storages of weapons of the militant networks, and thus establishes alliance with Tuareg groups, as well as the traditional or administrative authorities. [...] This is the main reason why Barkhane is silent about the trafficking of drugs, while at the time of the intervention, in the spring of 2013, Serval took action against what it defined ‘narco-jihādists’ (personal communication, French senior analyst, 13 June 2016).

Therefore, the reciprocal interests of the Barkhane force – which replaced Serval in 2014, in the context of a reorganization of French military presence in the Sahelian region (Hanne 2016) – and former insurgents produced severe consequences on the definition of post-conflict security balances, guaranteeing them immunity and the ability to carry on their own illicit business (Baldaro 2018).¹⁴

8. Conclusion

The concept of ‘legitimacy’ refers to the relationship between political actors and people, specifically concerning the right of the state to impose rules on its subjects who agree to comply with them. It steers the discourse over the nature of the MNLA as a political-military organisation representative of the majority of the north-Malian populations, and the political appeal of their secessionist claims. Conversely to the alleged trans-ethnic and regional nature of its political demands, which the presumed social legitimacy was based on, the low level of representativeness of the MNLA – which is essentially perceived as the product of alliance and internal conflict dynamics within the Tuareg ethnic community – undermined its capacity to obtain popular support for the nationalist project in Azawad. The weak social and performative legitimacy of the MNLA explains its marginal role in the political dynamics of military occupation and administrative control of the Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu territories. Salafi-jihādist movements were deemed capable of

¹⁴ The distinctions between nationalist rebel militants and narco-traffickers in Northern Mali has often been highly nuanced, depending on the political and economic interests at stake. The involvement of former insurgents or local ‘big men’ – or even state officials – in the trafficking networks is still a recurring feature in the region.

meeting the social needs of the populations by addressing the bad institutional governance and deficit of service delivery through the adoption of economic support measures and the provision of essential goods and services. On the contrary, the MNLA members were perceived as invaders and accused of abuse and widespread violence; the movement was largely considered the main driver and cause of the crisis in the North, together with poor state governance and widespread corruption, according to surveys (Bleck et al. 2016). Thus, to the extent that the legitimacy “turns out to be created, maintained and destroyed not at the input but at the output side of the political system” (Rothstein 2009, p. 313), the MNLA’s inability to emerge as a credible political actor, failing to address the needs of local communities, illustrated its low legitimacy.

In the wake of the failure of MNLA’s nationalist plans in Azawad, the trade-off between ‘domestic’ legitimacy in North Mali and international legitimacy provided the Tuareg-based movement with an opportunity to switch its political goals, aiming at tightening control over Kidal. Thus, the deepening of the political relations between the French diplomatic authorities and the leaders of the Tuareg insurgents has allowed the movement to gain a stronger position in the power struggle with the state. Furthermore, it fostered the consolidation of an informal governance system in Kidal, defined by the exclusion of the state actors and the monopoly over the legitimate use of force by non-state actors. In this regard, while the French intervention and the deployment of military operations Serval and Barkhane restricted the exercise of Malian sovereignty, by awarding a particular status to the Kidal territory, the Tuareg armed groups steered the political strategies of France in a direction consistent with their own political interests. Therefore, the re-definition of the legitimization strategies through a partial adjustment of their claims and political objectives, allowed the MNLA to acquire a new centrality in the regional balances and to secure an informal system of governance.

The international legitimacy acquired by MNLA as a result of the French decision to grant the secular rebel movement a privileged position in the negotiation

processes for the resolution of the crisis, finally met the resistance of political and civil society in Bamako. In this sense, the constructed nature of an ‘Islamist threat’, which motivated and shaped the intervention (Bergamaschi 2013), and the political use of the concept of ‘terrorism’, employed by France to justify its military involvement in Mali and to obtain political legitimacy from the international community (Charbonneau & Jourde 2016), was part of a strategy intended to exclude Ansār al-Dīn from any bargaining table. At the same time, the use of the concept of terrorism emerged in the mainstream discourse of the political actors in Bamako. First, the interim authorities in Bamako capitalised on the perception of a terrorist threat in order to garner international support. In addition, they took advantage of it to discredit the nationalist insurgents, who were accused of having triggered the institutional collapse of the state (Charbonneau & Sears 2014). The different claims of the Tuareg groups – the independence of the Azawad by the MNLA, and the application of the sharʿīa all over the country by Ansār al-Dīn – influenced a completely divergent perception of the notion of terrorism and a different political use by the actors involved in the crisis dynamics.

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